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Having Your Dog and Eating It Too?

Is it ever ok to eat your dog?

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9,400 year old human feces containing a dog skull segment,

Source: Samuel Belknap

Samuel Belknap, a graduate student at the University of Maine, recently made a [surprising discovery](#) while analyzing a 9,400 year old human turd. The "intact human paleofecal sample," was found in a cave in southwest Texas. Among the bits of small mammals, fish, and birds imbedded in the feces was a chunk of domestic dog skull. It seems that the Paleolithic defecator had dined the previous day on a stew of dog brains and flesh spiced with a bit of prickly pear. Belknap had discovered the earliest evidence that early Native Americans not only lived with dogs but also ate them for dinner.

I have to admit to being a little grossed out by the report. Everything about it was, well, disgusting. First, like most Westerners, I don't like the idea of eating dog meat. Second, it involved eating brain which I know is yucky because I ate sheep brain occasionally when I was a college student in Beirut. Third, the piece of dog skull was embedded in a hunk of ancient desiccated feces which turned essentially into poop once Belknap soaked it in water. While this

archeological discovery made national news, it struck me that the combination of shit, brains, and dog meat represents the ultimate trifecta of disgust elicitors.

Why Is Dog Meat Disgusting?

Why are most people so disturbed at the idea of eating dog yet have no qualms about chowing down on an equally intelligent animal such as a pig? The University of Virginia psychologist [Jonathan Haidt](#) studies disgust as part of his research on moral [intuition](#). In some of his experiments, people were asked to make decisions about situations which are upsetting even though they do not involve the infliction of suffering or harm.

One of his scenarios involved a dog: *A family's dog was killed by a car in front of their home. They had heard that dog meat was delicious so they cut the dog's body up and ate it for dinner.* Haidt then asked his subjects if it is ok for a person to eat their dead pet and to explain the logic behind their answer. When I pose this scenario to my students, nearly all of them agree it would be immoral for the family to eat their deceased dog. Most of them, however, cannot come up with a coherent logical reason for their decision. After all, the dead dog is not going to suffer. They tell me it just feels wrong. It's the yuck factor.

One Culture's Meat.....

The "yuck factor" is a human universal. People in every culture experience the emotion of disgust, and it is often associated with consumption of flesh. However, the meats that a culture deems disgusting varies greatly. Dog is a prime example. People have been eating dogs since there were dogs. The surprise is the extent to which dogs are eaten today. Most of the world's dog meat is consumed in Asia where about 25 million dogs are killed as food each year. The Chinese eat more dogs than anyone else. In China, dog meat is about as expensive as beef. In 2004, the retail cost for a pound of canine flesh was about \$2, though organ meat is cheaper. Dog brains were going for about a dollar each and a penis for \$1.45.

Anthony Podberscek, an anthrozoologist at Cambridge University, has studied the cultural conflict that is emerging in South Korea over the consumption of dog flesh. While South Koreans consume over 12,000 tons of dog meat a year, over the last two decades dogs have become popular as [pets](#). How do

Koreans manage to eat the same members of a species they are coming to love as companions?

The answer is compartmentalization. South Koreans place meat dogs in a different moral category than pet dogs. The meat dogs are usually mid-sized animals with short light-colored hair; they look disconcertingly like Old Yeller, and they are given a special name (nureongi). Meat dogs and pet dogs are sometimes sold at the same markets. However, the meat dogs are housed in special cages with pink-orange bars which clearly distinguish them as "food" rather than "pets."

Cultural Differences in Why Dog-Flesh Is Forbidden

Despite the popularity of dog meat in some cultures, the consumption of canine flesh is taboo in many parts of the world - but sometimes for opposite reasons. Americans find the idea of eating a golden retriever revolting because dogs have become our friends and full-fledged family members. The pet products industry refers to this trend "the humanization of pets." Psychologically, humanizing your dog means that eating it would be akin to cannibalism.

In contrast, the reasons that dog-eating is disgusting in the Middle East and parts of India is that dogs are considered vermin. In classical Hinduism, for example, dogs were despised because they were said to eat vomit and corpses, and have [sex](#) with their relatives. Most interpretations of the Koran also consider dogs as unclean. In short, in these countries eating dogs would be like eating rats for an American. This illustrates an important principle about the human-meat relationship: We don't eat creatures we love and we don't eat creatures we loathe....

Which takes me back to the guy who defecated a piece of dog skull on a cave floor 9,400 years ago. I'm thinking that he probably had no animosity to the dog he ate for dinner. But I also suspect that he did not think of it as a pet either.

Post-Script: A Canine Culinary Case Study

You sometimes hear that people don't eat their pets. This is not always the case. When my friend Dan was a Peace Corps volunteer in the rural

Philippines, he lived with a family that had a pet dog. One afternoon, the dog, for no apparent reason, bit Dan on the leg, causing an injury severe enough to require a visit to the local clinic. The doctor was concerned that the dog might have rabies so he asked Dan to bring it in for observation. An hour later, Dan returned to the house to fetch the dog, but it was too late - the family pet was already in the stewpot. Dan told me, "I am one of the few people who can say "I ate the dog that bit me."

Notes:

1. The title of this post was (with permission) stolen from a terrific essay on the complexities of human-animal relationships by James Serpell, "Having Our Dogs and Eating Them Too: Why Animals Are A Social Issue."

2. For an excellent discussion of dog-eating and cultural clashes, see Frank H. Wu's essay, [The Best "Chink" Food: Dog-Eating and the Dilemma of Diversity](#).

3. A discussion of the laws against eating pets is in Brian Palmer's article, [Here Kitty, Kitty, Kitty: Is It Legal to Eat Your Cat?](#)